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How Did the U.S. Look Before the EPA?

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Firemen over the Cuyahoga River spray water on the tug Arizona while the river burns.

BETTMANN/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY

On June 22, 1969, the Cuyahoga River caught fire. But it wasn't the first time the waterway near Cleveland, Ohio, burned. The river was so polluted that industrial waste and oil-soaked debris atop its surface caught fire so regularly, this particularly blaze didn't even raise eyebrows among locals. But it did catch the attention of reporters at Time magazine, who published photos of the burning river and claimed it was so polluted it "oozes rather than flows."

Time's story on the burning Cuyahoga River sparked outrage among Americans, and brought national attention to the country's need to clean up its waterways and protect the environment. It eventually helped lead to changes like the Clean Water Act and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

The Cuyahoga article was even instrumental in President Richard Nixon forming the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA) in 1970. [Its mission then](#) — and now — is to "protect human health by safeguarding the air we breathe, water we drink and land on which we live."

But now the EPA faces an uncertain future with the threat of massive budget cuts, decreases in research funding and rollbacks of Obama-era [environmental regulations](#), including those to America's waterways, streams and wetlands. Now, nearly 50 years after the EPA was created, there's serious talk about decimating it.

So has the environment [improved](#) since the creation of the EPA? Between 1971 and 1977 the newly formed agency hired freelance photographers to document problems for a series titled [Documerica Project](#), and in 2011 the National Archives digitized more than 15,000 of the images. Take a look at some here to see how the environment looked before the EPA stepped in to clean it up.



Smoke pours from massive smokestacks where discarded auto batteries are burned. Houston, 1972

MARC ST. GIL/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA



Many locals were opposed to stripping the land in Southeastern Ohio, but afraid to demand reform because most also worked for the coal companies. Hendrysburg, Ohio, 1973

ERIK CALONIUS/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA



A bumper sticker on a car parked in a lot on West Street near the newly constructed World Trade Center jokes about how to bring change. New York City, 1973
WIL BLANCHE/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA

Children play in front of their home, unaware that a smelter stack is emitting arsenic and lead in nearby Tacoma. Ruston, Washington, 1972
GENE DANIELS/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA

An illegal dumping area off the New Jersey Turnpike is an eyesore, as Manhattan and the Hudson River sit just beyond. 1973

GARY MILLER/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA

Clark Avenue and Clark Avenue Bridge are obscured by smoke from heavy industry. Cleveland, Ohio, 1973

FRANK ALEKSANDROWICZ/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA

The Atlas Chemical Company stacks pump smoke across farmland, covering everything in black soot. Marshall, Texas, 1972

MARC ST. GIL/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA

Trash and old tires litter the shores of Baltimore Harbor. 1973

JIM PICKERELL/NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMERICA

